DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 190 997 CS 005 592

AUTHOR Spady, William G.
TITLE Literacy: Meeting the Challenge. Literacy: Competency and the Problem of Graduation Requirements.
INSTITUTION Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Right to Read Program.
PUB DATE 80
NOTE 18p.: Paper presented at the National Right to Read Conference (Washington, DC, May 27-29, 1978).
AVAILABLE FROM Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Competency Based Education: Criterion Referenced Tests: Curriculum Development: *Educational Change: *Educational Needs: *Graduation Requirements: *Literacy: Secondary Education: Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Arguing that the term "competency based education" (CBE) has been erroneously applied to minimum competency programs, this booklet contends that the problems addressed by the minimum competency movement can be, but probably will not be, resolved by the implementation of true competency based education (CBE). The first section of the booklet defines competencies and extrapolates some implications for curriculum and assessment. The second section, comprising the bulk of the booklet, delineates the substantial revolution that competency based education entails: a shift from time to outcomes based organization and a shift from teacher referenced to criterion referenced standards. It goes on to suggest that not only the magnitude of these changes, but also the lack of a consensus about appropriate outcomes will probably prevent widespread implementation of CBE. It then adduces the deficiencies both of teacher referenced standards and of the norm referenced standards introduced to correct them and presents two alternative systems that could be criterion referenced. The booklet (1) argues that the accountability movement does not address the causes of illiteracy, which inhere in the system of instruction: (2) outlines the reforms that would have to ensue if the problem were instead conceived as effectiveness: (3) indicates how CBE would resolve the problem: and (4) stipulates measures that would ensure its flexibility. (Author)

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LITERACY: MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Literacy: Competency and the Problem of Graduation Requirements

William G. Spady

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
Patricia Harris, *Secretary*
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Office of Education

The material in this booklet was prepared pursuant to a contract with the Right to Read Program, U.S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such work are encouraged to express freely their professional judgments. The content does not necessarily reflect Office of Education policy or views.

The material in this booklet was presented at the National Right to Read Conference, Washington, D.C., May 27-29, 1978. The material was edited by the staff of the National Institute of Advanced Study which conducted the Conference under contract from the U.S. Office of Education.

FOREWORD

A major goal of the Right to Read Program has been to disseminate information about the status of literacy education, successful products, practices and current research finding in order to improve the instruction of reading. Over the years, a central vehicle for dissemination have been Right to Read conferences and seminars. In June 1978, approximately 350 Right to Read project directors and staff from State and local education and nonprofit agencies convened in Washington, D.C. to consider Literacy: Meeting the Challenge.

The conference focused on three major areas:

- examinations of current literacy problems and issues;
- assessment of accomplishments and potential resolutions regarding literacy issues; and
- exchange and dissemination of ideas and materials on successful practices toward increasing literacy in the United States

All levels of education, preschool through adult, were considered.

The response to the Conference was such that we have decided to publish the papers in a series of individual publications. Additional titles in the series are listed separately as well as directions for ordering copies.

SHIRLEY A. JACKSON
Director
Basic Skills Program

LITERACY MEETING THE CHALLENGE

A Series of Papers Presented at the National Right to Read Conference May 1978

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SUMMARY

Overview

This paper argues that the term "Competency Based Education" has been erroneously applied to minimum competency programs and that the problems addressed by the minimum competency movement can be, but probably will not be resolved by the implementation of true Competency Based Education. The first section defines competencies and extrapolates some implications for curriculums and assessment. The second section delineates the substantial revolution that Competency Based Education entails: a shift from time to outcomes based organization and a shift from teacher referenced to criterion referenced standards. It goes on to suggest that not only the magnitude of these changes, but the lack of a consensus about appropriate outcomes will probably prevent widespread implementation of CBE. The paper then adduces the deficiencies both of teacher referenced standards and of the norm referenced standards introduced to correct them, and it presents two alternative systems that could be criterion referenced. It argues that the accountability movement does not address the causes of illiteracy, which inhere in the system of instruction; outlines the reforms that would have to ensue if the problem were instead conceived as effectiveness; indicates how CBE would resolve the problem; and stipulates measures that would ensure its flexibility. It concludes that so-called CBE testing substitutes accountability for reform and thus does not augur well for the CBE movement.

Definition of Competencies

Competencies permit one to perform the activities associated with one's role in life successfully or to achieve results in one's life. Thus, their context is real life and their focus the various capabilities that its major roles entail. They imply not merely acquisition or possession, but application, and they involve not only cognitive and manual skills, but effective capacities, including the essential capacity to adapt to change. Finally, they represent the integration of discrete capacities, some subtle and unmeasurable.

Conventional school programs build capacities; a program based on competencies will differ substantially. Its curriculum will derive from an analysis of life's major roles as projected into the future, rather than from the internal logic of academic subjects. It will assess qualitative aspects of performance, as well as measurable levels of cognitive and manual skills. And it will deal more intensively and explicitly with affective capacities.

CBE v Conventional Programs and the Problem of Outcomes

Moreover, Competency Based Education involves a major shift from the base that now organizes most school functions—time—to outcomes and a correlative shift from vague referenced to criterion referenced standards of accomplishment. That is, whereas time now defines courses, which students may pass or fail at the end, units of content mastered define CBE courses, and students move continuously through them at their individual rates. Instead of grades, an unspecified and variable admixture of such components as achievement and attitude, CBE sets explicit goals that express the competencies and capacities that students will develop and demonstrate.

The virtual revolution outlined above is not the only reason for doubting whether schools will *en masse* convert to Competency Based Education. Four major themes characterize the contributions to development and socialization that society expects from schools: social responsibility, social integration, personal development, and technical competencies. Each theme represents an alternative concept of competency and hence a potential base for a CBE program. Moreover, not all proponents of the same theme construe it identically or stress the same outcomes. In default of even moderate consensus on outcomes, most State initiatives termed CBE have adopted the lowest common denominator—basic skills. Hence the issue of educational effectiveness has become the potential nightmare of accountability.

Standards

Although the greater percentage of students who remain in school for the full twelve years and the custom of social promotion have eroded the credibility of the high school diploma, in seeking to restore it the minimum competency movement misses the fundamental problem: teacher referenced standards—that is, grades which represent subjective judgments based upon mixed and fluctuating criteria. Two alternative systems could be criterion referenced:

- *Curriculum referenced standards*, set by experts and designating specific kinds and levels of subject-matter mastery; or
- *Societal referenced standards*, derived from the judgments of a broad range of citizens and designating competencies as previously defined.

Nearly every State that has implemented standardized testing has chosen instead norm referenced standards, which, like the system they are supposed to correct, fail to represent what a student can read and what particular combination of strengths and deficiencies enter into his performance.

Defining the Problem as Effectiveness

Instead of accountability, the problem should be conceived as effectiveness. If it were, two major activities would have to ensue:

- Two major relationships would have to be examined and improved: the relationship between the structures that organize school activity and the techniques, procedures, and content that comprise instruction and the relationship between staff and students.
- Instruction and assessment would have to be closely integrated and thus continuous diagnosis, monitoring, and feedback initiated.

Such integration inheres in Competency Based Education because the instruction it supplies devolves from explicit outcome goals and the assessment devices it uses represent operational definitions of those goals. The goals-means approach can avert the danger of inflexibility if goals, instructional experiences, and assessment devices are all explicit, known, agreed upon, adaptive, and multiplied to permit choice.

Conclusion

Competency Based Education improves students' opportunities. It also requires that educators and the public give up deep-rooted habits and assumptions. Thus, while the so-called CBE testing movement, which substitutes accountability for reform, is accelerating, the CBE movement may not come to fruition.

LITERACY: COMPETENCY AND THE PROBLEM OF GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

During the past five years over thirty states have enacted some form of policy action dealing with the problem of high school graduation requirements. In nearly all cases, these actions require that students do more than "pass" a sufficient number of courses as a condition for receiving a diploma, and in most, it means "passing" an externally developed standardized test in literacy and mathematical skills.

There are at least three major concerns underlying these new policies which portray a complex picture of educational ineffectiveness. One is that many youngsters are graduating from school without essential literacy and mathematical skills. A second is that too many high school graduates are poorly equipped to succeed in the economic, political, and social roles they will occupy as young adults. The third is that the diploma, due to "grade inflation" and the "social promotion" of students, has ceased to have credibility and meaning. The result, then, is recommendations leading to raising standards and imposing new conditions for receiving a diploma which must include a concrete demonstration of "competency." This approach has mistakenly come to be called Competency Based Education (CBE).

This unfortunate misuse of an important educational concept actually misses the point in terms of the meaning and importance of *Competency* in life role activities, what it means to *Base* a program on competencies, and in what respects the term *Education* extends beyond the boundaries of student certification alone. In short, Competency Based Education, if adequately understood and flexibly applied, could be an exciting and valuable concept, but in order to be so—educators, policymakers, and the public will have to be willing to entertain some substantial departures from traditional educational assumptions and practices. The following offers a broader view of this concept, some of its important implications for school systems, and the potential role of literacy programs in such an approach.

The Concept of Competency

As noted in an earlier paper (Spady, 1977), I share a viewpoint with many others who have worked with the CBE concept in institutions of higher education that competencies are "... indicators of successful performance in life-role activities." (p. 10). Framed in a slightly different way, *competencies involve the ability to create effective results in one's life.* While there are small

differences in the implications of these two definitions, their common elements are most important.

First, they suggest that the focus and context of competencies are *real life* and the various roles we occupy which require such a broad range of individual capabilities. To be competent in a life role (such as bread-winner, consumer, mate, parent, or political citizen) is to create the quality of experience and success you seek in that life role. This means that the curriculums developed to facilitate competencies must take as their starting points an assessment of the demands and contingencies associated with major life roles, not the logic and substance of academic subjects. There are, for example, no life roles called language arts, mathematics, or social studies.

Second, life role success fundamentally requires *coping* with the ever changing realities of social conditions. The environments, resources, regulations, and individuals that are an integral part of modern day life are often troublesome and continually changing, thereby suggesting that one of the most essential attributes of a generally competent person will be adaptability in the fact of difficult and shifting circumstances and demands.

Third, competencies are formed through the highly complex *integration* and *application* of many discrete capacities. These capacities represent the essential building blocks or foundation on which competencies rest. Some or these capacities are, of course, quite apparent and measurable; others are extremely subtle or even invisible to many people. The essential point, however, is that competency requires tapping this reservoir of individual capacities, integrating them in complex ways, and applying them based on the contingencies present in specific social contexts. *Competency rarely involves the simple mechanical application of simple cognitive or manual capacities.*

Fourth, this integration and application of capacities which underlies competency clearly reflects both the cognitive and manual skills directly supported in most school instruction and a broad repertory of affective capacities, which may, on balance, actually be the attributes that most facilitate life-role success. That is, while knowledge, skills, and concepts (including literacy) are important components of success in all life roles, they do not ensure it. Successful role performance is at least equally facilitated by the attitudes, values, feelings, expectations, motivation, independence, cooperation, endurance, and intuition people possess. Affective capacities cannot be left implicit in a life-role oriented program as they now are in so many schools. In many life situations these affective capacities may be both "the medium" and an essential component of "the message" itself.

Fifth, competencies ultimately require role *performance*, not just the acquisition of skills or knowledge of appropriate methods. They are, in other words, *reflections of both what one is and what one can do.* Competency

oriented programs should, therefore, develop assessment tools that focus on the more qualitative aspects of performance as well as the more concrete demonstrations of cognitive and manual skill tapped by conventional measurement devices.

When taken together these implications represent a major departure from the typical capacity-building orientations of most school programs. Social reality and enlightened projections about life in the twenty-first century become our guides to conceptions of life roles, competencies, curriculums, appropriate instructional settings and agents, and assessment tools. The role of segmented school subjects (including reading) taught in the generally sheltered environment of school buildings will have to be altered substantially if we choose to foster and assess competency outcomes. Capacities *must* indeed be developed if competencies are to emerge, but the methods, contexts, and timing of their development could alter significantly if life roles were made a central vehicle in curriculum and instruction.

The issues on which all of this is focused are the *transferability* of school learning to life and the extent of the school's *responsibilities* for fostering the moral and technical socialization of youngsters. Although debates have raged over these two related problems for decades, some of the general domains of agreement will be explored in the following section.

The "Bases" of School Operations

School systems, like all formal organizations, must contend with two competing sets of forces: those focused on system *productivity* and those which stress *maintenance* and preservation of the organization. In general, the productivity subsystem of an organization requires adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness to changing demands and technologies, whereas the maintenance system is concerned with ordering, routinizing, and stabilizing activities and procedures. The challenge to administrators is to manage and support both systems without impairing the impact and effectiveness of either. Given the inherent differences between them, this is an extremely challenging task.

When we examine the actual organization and operations of schools more closely, we find elements of these two competing subsystems imbedded in classrooms as well as administrative offices. To a large extent these elements reflect two major bases of organizing school functions and activities: one is *time* and the other is *outcomes* (or results). CBE implies a major shift from time as the primary "base" of operations to outcomes (or competencies) as that base, and from "vague-referenced" standards of accomplishment to more specific "criterion-referenced" ones.

At present, schooling is *time based.* Major procedures, operations, decisions, and opportunities for both staff and students are dictated by the

clock, the schedule, and the calendar. Fixed periods of time such as class periods, grading periods, semesters, and school years impose arbitrary constraints on the ways in which we organize instruction and when and how often we evaluate and certify student performance. In the time based system as we know it, time is fixed, students are usually given single opportunities to "pass," and the standards used are usually personal, subjective, variable, and vague. Grades represent a vague and unknown mixture of achievement, ability, motivation, deportment, attendance, "attitude," contextual, and background factors. The high school diploma is merely a certificate of attendance and an indicator of the student's willingness to "satisfy" the particular minimal expectations and standards of a series of teachers. Society's expectations for the year by year social promotion of students has reinforced the fixed-time basis of schooling, even though we know that the achievement differences among our high school graduates are enormous (and their general standards of social and technical competency are quite disappointing). A time based system stresses *role* rather than goals, emphasizes *maintenance* rather than productivity, and encourages orientations concerning "having things run smoothly" and "getting through the day" rather than "creating results."

An *outcome based* approach to schooling—which is what CBE represents—would reverse the relationships between time and standards. Goals and objectives take on new importance as they are made more explicit, defined in terms of the actual competencies and capacities students will develop and demonstrate, and made the basis of operations and decisions regarding student assessment and movement through the instructional program. In such a system schooling will no longer be determined by time; instead time is used in more flexible ways, and multiple opportunities for instruction and assessment are provided. This means that much more small-group and individualized instruction is needed to foster student *mastery* of given outcome goals. In addition, courses, credit, report cards, and standards will be defined on a criterion referenced basis so that actual levels of skill are known. "Promotion" is not from grade to grade with a total cohort of students at a fixed or final point in time, but a continuous movement through an instructional program. Courses will be *units of content* representing levels of mastery, not units of time.

To use the term "Competency Based" to describe a major approach to education is, then, to treat the framing and attainment of outcomes as the primary base of school operations. But only a nodding acquaintance with the politics and sociology of schools is sufficient to suggest that there is considerable diversity and disagreement among both educators and segments of the public regarding which outcomes should be given priority in school programs. It is doubtful, therefore, that if schools actually wished to become outcome-based that a sufficient consensus could be obtained in most places regarding the particular outcomes around which they could really organize.

According to Mitchell and Spady (1978) who discuss these competing alternatives in some detail, there are four broad themes which characterize the expectations of educators and the public regarding the contributions schools should make to the development and socialization of youngsters capable of entering and participating in a society that is orderly, productive, and attractive to its members. These themes include: 1) nurturing in students a sense of *Social Responsibility* regarding the consequences of their actions for the welfare of others and the society as a whole; 2) generating and supporting *Social Integration* among individuals from varying social and cultural groups through direct interaction and participation in collective activities; 3) stimulating and fostering the fullest possible *Development* and expression of the individual's physical, affective, and mental capacities; and 4) promoting and certifying the achievement of necessary and important *Technical Competencies.* Each theme has had a major place in the historical evolution of American education, and each has its visible and vocal contemporary advocates as well.

What is particularly germane to this analysis is that each theme represents an alternative conception of what constitutes "real competency" for individuals, each has the potential for becoming *dominant* outcome *base* for a given school or school system, and each represents an agenda to which every teacher and administrator must be sensitive, irrespective of the pressures imposed by the others. Attention given to one theme often means overlooking others. Consequently, with staff attention divided in four directions at once, it is often true that none of the outcomes desired in each domain is fully realized. The result is both potential and real staff vulnerability for failing to meet either someone's or everyone's expectations.

It is also important to note that there are major philosophical differences among the advocates of each major theme which further contribute to policy and operational strain in schol systems. For example, to some social responsibility means developing loyalty and respect for social institutions and adjusting one's moral and legal conduct to prevailing rules and norms. For others it means showing sensitivity to others and being willing to serve and support those in need. Similarly, to some social integration means learning appropriate social roles, fostering a sense of belonging, and appreciating and participating in existing social structures and groups. To others it means exercising leadership and initiative in promoting group cohesion and purpose, or establishing close and significant ties to other individuals or cultural groups.

There are also differences among the advocates of personal development. Some would concentrate on intellectual and physical development, others on affective capacities. Within each group some would stress "trainable and proven" capacities, others would advocate "discovering" emergent capacities and promoting creative expression. Similarly, some advocates of technical

competency are primarily concerned with basic language and mathematical proficiency; others with a broader range of technical skills. Among each of these some stress the utility and minimum standards of competencies, while others seek high standards of excellence and innovative performance capabilities.

Given the tremendous range of qualitative and quantitative differences sought by various groups in terms of school outcomes, it is not all that surprising to find most State "CBE" policy initiatives reflecting a "lowest common denominator/basic skill" orientation to required student outcomes. The major exceptions, such as Maryland, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, have emerged largely as the result of strong State Board of Education/State Department of Education leadership rather than legislative mandate. Yet it is these nearly three dozen other "testing bills" that have substantially turned an *educational effectiveness* issue into a potential *accountability* nightmare.

Implementing Competency Based "Education"

To many of its advocates the imposition of new performance requirements for high school graduation is an attempt to re-establish "the credibility of the high school diploma." Now that over 90 percent of an age cohort stays in school a full 12 years and "social promotion" within an age-graded system is accepted policy, we have a sizable proportion of "graduates" today who would have not finished school in previous eras. To some, a distressting proportion of them are conspicuously deficient in basic literacy skills as well as in more advanced aspects of development.

What lies at the heart of this dilemma is not the diploma or social promotion per se, it is the system of *Teacher Referenced Standards* that we use along with time as the basis for establishing grades and Carnegie Units of "credit." As noted earlier, the combination of individual subjective judgment, very mixed criteria, and floating standards leads to a labelling and credit system that is best described as *vague-referenced*. That is, the letter or numerical grades dispensed by teachers convey far more symbolic value than actual content. Twelve years of vague referenced symbols provide one with a transcript and diploma but not necessarily a good education.

The paradox in all of this, of course, is that employers and college admissions officers, the very people who need to make selection decisions about graduates based on what they know, can do, and are like, are generally staunch opponents of abandoning the Carnegie Unit Credit system even though it contributes to the problem of applicants with only paper qualifications. They are "getting stuck" with the very evaluation-certification system they continue to perpetuate by using time and letter grades as the primary criteria for graduation.

There are, of course, alternative approaches to setting and defining standards that could be considered, two of which could be made criterion referenced rather than vague referenced. They are *Curriculum Referenced* and *Societal Referenced Standards.*

Curriculum referenced standards would apply to the acquisition of specific kinds and levels of subject matter mastery. The content and criteria of the standards would be based on the logic and content of the subject and would be set by experts in each respective field, and we would expect the outcomes in such a system primarily to reflect cognitive and psychomotor capacities. Major literacy programs such as Right to Read would probably adopt this approach.

Societal referenced standards would, by contrast, reflect the judgments of a broader array of citizens regarding the competencies needed to facilitate sucess in life roles. In this case the social, political, and economic demands of life would constitute the frame of reference for both curriculum building and standard setting. Mastery of individual capacities could be included among the array of competency standards selected.

The third major alternative, *Norm Referenced Standards,* has, of course, been the popular choice of nearly every State that has chosen to implement a standardized testing program. Depending on how measurement is actually done and reported, the advantages of norm referenced testing may be little better than teacher referenced. In this system standards are fundamentally comparative and peer based, and performance in many different knowledge and skill areas is usually reduced into a single numerical score. While you may know that a student scored at the "eighth grade level" in reading, you may still not know what the student can and cannot read nor what his particular strengths and deficiencies may be.

The use of norm referenced testing to create an accountability system for students will not solve the problems of educational effectiveness that lie within the instructional system itself. The basic orientation of accountability approaches is to use some reliable form of student performance data as the basis for making judgments and decisions about either students or staff. This often means reward, placement, or promotion decisions. While remediation for "substandard" performers may be required, that remediation generally consists of providing these students with the content and approaches that have not worked for them in the first place. Nearly every example of current State "CBE" policies either declares or presumes that the existing time-based, age-graded structure of schooling shall remain unchanged.

If the problem were more appropriately seen as an effectiveness issue, then two more complex, but ostensibly more valuable, activities would have to be undertaken. The first is examining and improving the nature of and interrelationship between two major factors that affect instructional

effectiveness. One is the bearing which school structures, i.e., the organizing principles for school activity, have on the techniques, procedures, mechanics, and content that affect student involvement, learning, and performance. The other has to do with the quality and character of expectations and social process that characterize the interaction between staff and students. These factors lie at the heart of school effectiveness and cannot be ignored.

The second activity that needs to be undertaken in order to impact on school effectiveness is to create a *CLOSE ARTICULATION* between student assessment and instruction. This means continual diagnosis, monitoring, feedback, and correction of student progress based on regular contact, *NOT* the once a year or once every three years administration of "the big standardized test" which, in actuality, may not correspond very closely with the curriculum the students have been pursuing. It is really not clear what we expect such tests to tell us about actual levels of student achievement that the teachers who interact with them on a daily basis should not already know. If this information is missing, it is due to the inadequacies of the classroom assessment system, and that is what needs to be strengthened. If it is available but not used effectively to improve student learning, the fault may lie in our typical use of classroom assessment to manage and control students rather than to manage and improve instruction.

Therefore, aside from monitoring *the system* and its programs, it is not clear that such tests provide important information about students (other than a grade-level score) that teachers do not or should not already know. Yet in most States where such testing programs have been installed, it is the students who are penalized for program weaknesses by having promotion or diplomas withheld, without assurance that programs will actually improve.

In a genuine competency-based or capacity-based program the danger of poor articulation between assessment and instruction would be averted. CBE is built around the close integration of three essential components: 1) outcome goals, 2) instructional experiences that directly reflect those goals, and 3) assessment devices that represent the operational definition of the goal itself. To build maximum flexibility and responsiveness into such a program, *ALL THREE* need to be *explicit* (i.e., criterion referenced and clear), *known* (that is, public and visible—without secrets and surprises), *agreed upon* by all those with a direct interest in the student's progress, *allow choice* (i.e., be framed and developed with several equivalent alternatives to choose from), and *adaptive*. Being adaptive means to use student performance data as the basis for modifying and improving four major things: 1) the student's subsequent performance, 2) the content and quality of instruction provided, 3) the assessment tools used to measure goal attainment, and 4) the content and sequencing of goals and curriculums.

Since there are obvious dangers of such a goals-means educational approach becoming inflexible and mechanistic, care must be taken to create as

many choices and as much flexibility as possible. There are, as Spady and Mitchell (1977) point out, two distinctly different conceptions of how a goal based (or outcome based) approach such as this might work. One is to prescribe and delimit at the outset both the goals to be pursued and the role opportunities available to students. This has been characterized as the "whips and chains" approach to schooling. The other is to expand both the goal and role choices available, particularly when outcomes are defined in competency terms and engagement in realistic life-role pursuits is desirable. In a goal based program the important and determining principle of operation is *reaching the goal*. The means, locale, resources, agents, time and number of opportunities given for reaching it are open to far greater choice than in a role dominated program in which time and means are often taken more seriously than the outcomes attained.

From this perspective CBE can be fundamentally geared to improving student opportunities in several ways: 1) by dealing with time and opportunities for meeting goals more flexibly and realistically, 2) by articulating goals and the purposes of instruction clearly and openly, 3) by giving a specific content referent to assessment, evaluation, certification, and promotion, and 4) by bringing school work closer to the real factors affecting success and fulfillment in life.

What it does in the process is impact on the entire range of accepted school structures and practices including: the structure and use of goals and objectives; the meaning and bases of standards and credit; the definition, organization, and delivery of the curriculum; the criteria and methods of student evaluation, recordkeeping and reporting systems; student grouping and promotion practices; the criteria and timing of "graduation"; methods of student supervision and control; role expectations and relationships between staff and students; and staff interdependence and cooperation.

In a phrase, CBE means a continuous progress approach to instruction and certification for all students, and it asks both educators and the public to give up decades of habits and assumptions regarding the structures and methods of schooling, just at the time when accountability looks cheaper and safer than another version of school reform. The "CBE testing movement" has reached bandwagon proportions in just a few years, but CBE as an approach to improving effectiveness may become this century's major nonevent in public education.

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☆ U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1980 O—302-481